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How to Be Happy When Everything Goes Wrong

In the summer of 2010, Rachelle Friedman was preparing for one of the best periods of her life. She was recently engaged, surrounded by her best friends, and enjoying her bachelorette party.

Friedman and her friends were spending the day at the pool when one of them playfully pushed her into the shallow end of the water. Friedman floated slowly to the top of the pool until her face emerged. It was immediately obvious that something was wrong. “This isn’t a joke,” she said.

Her head had struck the bottom of the pool and shattered two vertebrae. In particular, the fracture of her C6 vertebra severed her spinal cord and left her permanently paralyzed from the chest down. She would never walk again.

“We are just so happy...”

One year later, Rachelle Friedman became Rachelle Chapman as she married her new husband. She decided to share some of her own thoughts on the whole experience during an online question-and-answer session in 2013.

She started by discussing some of the challenges you might expect. It was hard to find a job that could accommodate her physical disabilities. It could be frustrating and uncomfortable to deal with the nerve pain.

But she also shared a variety of surprisingly positive answers. For example, when asked if things changed for the worse she said, “Well things did change, but I can't say in a bad way at all.” Then, when asked about her relationship with her husband she said, “I think we are just so happy because my injury could have been worse.”

How is it possible to be happy when everything in life seems to go wrong? As it turns out, Rachelle's situation can reveal a lot about how our brains respond to traumatic events and what actually makes us happy.

The Surprising Truth About Happiness

There is a social psychologist at Harvard University by the name of Dan Gilbert. Gilbert's best-selling book, *Stumbling on Happiness* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/stumbling-on-happiness>), discusses the many ways in which we miscalculate how situations will make us happy or sad, and reveals some counterintuitive insights about how to be happy.

One of the primary discoveries from researchers like Gilbert is that extreme inescapable situations often trigger a response from our brain that increases positivity and happiness.

For example, imagine your house is destroyed in an earthquake or you suffer a serious injury in a car accident and lose the use of your legs. When asked to describe the impact of such an event most people talk about how devastating it

would be. Some people even say they would rather be dead than never be able to walk again.

But what researchers find is that when people actually suffer a traumatic event like living through an earthquake or becoming a paraplegic their happiness levels are nearly identical six months after the event as they were the day before the event.

How can this be?

The Impact Bias

Traumatic events tend to trigger what Gilbert refers to as our “psychological immune systems.” Our psychological immune systems promote our brain’s ability to deliver a positive outlook and happiness from an inescapable situation. This is the opposite of what we would expect when we imagine such an event. As Gilbert says, “People are not aware of the fact that their defenses are more likely to be triggered by intense rather than mild suffering. Thus, they mis-predict their own emotional reactions to misfortunes of different sizes.”

This effect works in a similar way for extremely positive events. For example, consider how it would feel to win the lottery. Many people assume that winning the lottery would immediately deliver long-lasting happiness, but research has found the opposite.

In a very famous study published by researchers at Northwestern University in 1978 it was discovered that the happiness levels of paraplegics and lottery winners were essentially *the same* within a year after the event occurred. You read that

correctly. One person won a life-changing sum of money and another person lost the use of their limbs and within one year the two people were equally happy.

It is important to note this particular study has not been replicated in the years since it came out, but the general trend has been supported again and again. We have a strong tendency to overestimate the impact that extreme events will have on our lives. Extreme positive and extreme negative events don't actually influence our long-term levels of happiness nearly as much as we think they would.

Researchers refer to this as The Impact Bias because we tend to overestimate the length or intensity of happiness that major events will create. The Impact Bias is one example of affective forecasting, which is a social psychology phenomenon that refers to our generally terrible ability as humans to predict our future emotional states.

How to Be Happy: Where to Go From Here

There are two primary takeaways from The Impact Bias about how to be happy.

First, we have a tendency to focus on the thing that changes and forget about the things that don't change. When thinking about winning the lottery, we imagine that event and all of the money that it will bring in. But we forget about the other 99 percent of life and how it will remain more or less the same.

We'll still feel grumpy if we don't get enough sleep. We still have to wait in rush hour traffic. We still have to work out if we want to stay in shape. We still have to send in our taxes each year.

It will still hurt when we lose a loved one. It will still feel nice to relax on the porch and watch the sunset. We imagine the change, but we forget the things that stay the same.

Second, a challenge is an impediment to a particular thing, not to you as a person. In the words of Greek philosopher Epictetus, “Going lame is an impediment to your leg, but not to your will.” We overestimate how much negative events will harm our lives for precisely the same reason that we overvalue how much positive events will help our lives. We focus on the thing that occurs (like losing a leg), but forget about all of the other experiences of life.

Writing thank you notes (<https://jamesclear.com/say-thank-you>) to friends, watching football games on the weekend, reading a good book (<https://jamesclear.com/best-books>), eating a tasty meal. These are all pieces of the good life you can enjoy with or without a leg. Mobility issues represent but a small fraction of the experiences available to you. Negative events can create task-specific challenges, but the human experience is broad and varied.

There is plenty of room for happiness in a life that may seem very foreign or undesirable to your current imagination.

For more on how to be happy and the fascinating ways in which our brain creates happiness, read Dan Gilbert's book *Stumbling on Happiness* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/stumbling-on-happiness>) (ebook

(<https://jamesclear.com/ebook/stumbling-on-happiness>) | audiobook (<https://jamesclear.com/audiobook/stumbling-on-happiness>)).

FOOTNOTES

1. Friedman's Ask Me Anything post on Reddit: I am Rachelle Friedman Chapman aka “The Paralyzed Bride”
(https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/19bqyg/i_am_rachelle_friedman_chapman_aka_the_paralyzed).
 2. This Dan Gilbert is not to be confused with the Dan Gilbert who owns the Cleveland Cavaliers.
 3. “Lottery winners and accident victims: is happiness relative?”
(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/690806>) Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 1978, Vol. 36, No. 8, 917-927.
 4. This is obvious, but I feel compelled to point out that individual experiences will differ. It’s quite possible you know a lottery winner that loves their life or a paraplegic that is constantly unhappy. The point of these studies (and the Impact Bias in general) is not to label the experience everyone will have, but to point out that we drastically overestimate the effect that extreme events have on our lives. In any particular situation, your mileage may vary.
 5. Affective forecasting is sometimes referred to as hedonic forecasting. Same thing, different name.
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Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

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With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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